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SUBJECT: ASSIMILATION, AGING THREATEN CYPRUS MARONITES

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¶1. SUMMARY: The Maronite community -- self-described as 6,000-strong but likely half that -- enjoys "official religious group" status under Cyprus's 1960 constitution. Concentrated historically in four villages south and west of Kyrenia, the Catholic Maronites endured near-total dislocation after the 1974 conflict; just 125 remain in the area now administered by Turkish Cypriots. Community leader Antonis Hajiroussos, who holds a non-voting seat in the Republic of Cyprus Parliament, briefed Emboffs January 11 on problems facing his community and its prospects for the future. In the Maronite enclaves north of the Green Line, the situation resembles that of their Greek Cypriot counterparts in the Karpass Peninsula (Reftel): some soon will vanish, while those hamlets with a critical mass of inhabitants should limp on, at least medium-term. Demographics is catching up, however, as average inhabitant age nears 75. Maronite leaders have concentrated their attention on lobbying Turkish Cypriot authorities to liberalize "visitation" rights for refugees residing in the south, and on pressuring the Turkish Army to relocate military facilities from the villages. Their entreaties thus far have received only lip service, however.

¶2. In the RoC-controlled areas, Hajiroussos revealed, Maronites long ago had abandoned agriculture for trades, small business, and the professions, many becoming prosperous. They had enjoyed less success in government, politics and big business, he lamented, owing to Greek Cypriot clannishness. Assimilation into the dominant Greek Orthodox community threatened his compatriots, Hajiroussos worried, with mixed marriages now the norm. Politically, Maronites remained solidly conservative, with left-wing AKEL winning only 10 percent support. No group backed rapprochement and a Cyprus solution more fervently than the Maronites, Hajiroussos asserted. As such, the slow pace of CyProb negotiations and worsening climate surrounding bi-communality troubled his community greatly. END SUMMARY.

Island More than Greeks, Turks

¶3. The Maronite community, whose roots lie in neighboring Lebanon, traces its arrival on Cyprus to 900 AD. "Catholics of the Oriental Rite," they fall hierarchically under the direction of the Patriarch of Antioch (Lebanon) and the Pope in Rome. Nearly all members speak Greek as their first language and are conversant in a Cypriot Arabic dialect; priests conduct their liturgy in Aramaic, however, the language of Jesus. Official Maronite literature claims the community's size reached 60,000 "at some stage" and now

numbers 6,000; most demographers claim 3,500 a more realistic figure. Prior to the conflict of 1974, nearly all Maronites practiced agriculture and lived in four villages in northwest Cyprus: Asomatos, Ayia Marina, Karpasia, and Kormakitis.

14. Cyprus's 1960 constitution recognized the Maronites, along with the Armenians and Latins, as "official" religious groups and gave them the option of aligning with either the Greek or Turkish communities for voting purposes. Primarily for religious and linguistic reasons -- although economics too played a part -- all chose to side with the more numerous Greeks. As a result of the 1974 conflict and subsequent demarcation of the cease-fire line, however, all four Maronite villages fell under the control of the Turkish Cypriot "state." Most residents relocated south in the negotiated population exchanges which followed, establishing refugee communities in Nicosia and second-city Limassol. Some 250 Maronite villagers, mainly elderly, chose to remain in the north; predictably, their numbers are dwindling.

Leader Reaches Out

15. Maronites in the government-controlled area enjoy expanded voting rights, electing both regional parliamentarians and a non-voting MP who represents the community. The MP currently encumbering the latter position, Antonis Hajiroussos, invited Poloffs to a January 11 roundtable to discuss his community's plight and its hopes for a brighter future. Attending as well were prominent Maronite Petros Markou, head of the Cypriot Consumers' Association, and a smattering of village "mukhtars" (essentially, small-town mayors).

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16. No group had suffered a harsher fate than the Maronites as a result of the 1974 conflict and de facto division of Cyprus, Hajiroussos argued. Members of the community, "per capita, once the largest landholders on the island," had had to abandon fertile fields and a pastoral lifestyle for the concrete of Nicosia and Limassol. Only the old and infirm had remained behind. Currently, just 160 Maronites inhabited the villages in the Turkish Cypriot-controlled area, he revealed, and all depended on RoC transfer payments to survive. While T/C-imposed restrictions on movement had diminished in recent years and relations with the larger community were cordial, the situation was far from perfect.

Village-by-village: Bigger is Better

17. Just three elderly Maronites, all women over 80, inhabited Asomatos, once a thriving village of 500 some twenty-five kilometers southwest of Kyrenia. Visitors were few, arriving usually on Sunday for the weekly mass. The Turkish Army long ago had commandeered unoccupied residences in Asomatos for officers' housing, Hajiroussos claimed, but many former Maronite homes remained vacant. Church and community leaders had requested UNFICYP's assistance in two matters: first, in petitioning the Army to relocate its forces to a neighboring T/C village, and second, in obtaining permission for former Maronite villagers, now resident in the south, to renovate their ancestral properties for vacation/weekend homes. Turkish Cypriot leaders had agreed in principle to meet the demands, Hajiroussos and Markou noted, but taken no action. Frustrated, the Cypriot Maronites had pressed their counterparts in Lebanon to raise the matter with visiting Turkish PM Erdogan, to no avail. Hajiroussos hoped the Embassy, too, might utilize its good offices on the Maronites' behalf.

18. Conditions were bleakest in Ayia Marina, the southernmost Maronite village. The site of a large Turkish Army camp that

housed heavy weapons, the village was fully off-limits, even to UNFICYP blue-berets. Its absentee mukhtar realized that hopes to dislodge the Army from Ayia Marina looked scant. He had lowered his aim, however, to winning blanket approval to open the village church for mass on its holy day, July 17. For assistance, Maronite leaders had petitioned not just UNFICYP but also Turkish Cypriot politician Serdar Denktash, owing to prior, positive dealings with the now-in-opposition politician. (NOTE: Under the current SOP, Christian leaders wishing to celebrate mass at churches in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area must solicit permission from "TRNC" authorities on a per occurrence basis. Maronites sought and received said authorization in July 2006, eventually conducting the first service in Ayia Marina in 33 years. END NOTE.) In response to Emboffs' inquiries regarding possible Maronite usage of the European Court of Human Rights in seeking property reinstatement, Hajiroussos claimed his flock had chosen not to take that route, believing it could only incense the majority T/C community and thus make life for the enclaved more difficult.

¶9. Twelve elderly Maronites called Karpasia home, its mukhtar declared. Six others resided half-time in the village, located five kilometers west of Asomatos. The Turkish Army had raised a large camp on Maronite land outside Karpasia, and officers were inhabiting 18 houses -- "the nicest," Markou added. Again via UNFICYP, Maronite officials were petitioning the Turks to redeploy their forces and allow former villagers to renovate their ancestral homes. In other parts of Karpasia, pre-1974 residents had done just that, and crossed north regularly for weekend and holiday stays. Masses occurred weekly, the elder revealed.

¶10. With 1100 residents Kormakitis was, in the pre-1974 period, the largest of the ancestral Maronite villages. It has padded its advantage with time; currently, 108 Maronites reside there, and it hosts the only functioning, albeit small, Maronite businesses (mainly family restaurants.) "Most inhabitants are afraid to work," Hajiroussos claimed. When pressed, he explained that Turkish Cypriots had not forbidden the Maronites from opening businesses. Rather, the villagers feared that, in meeting the regulatory requirements of the "state," they might somehow jeopardize their standing in the government-controlled areas. Karpasia's mukhtar called relations between Maronites and Turkish Cypriots "excellent." They were long-time neighbors, after all; unlike in the Karpass Peninsula, home to the enclaved Greek Cypriots, the Maronite areas hosted relatively few mainland Turk newcomers.

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¶11. Help for enclaved Maronites might be imminent, Hajiroussos hoped. European Union assistance funds for the Turkish Cypriot areas would soon start flowing, and the community hoped to capture a portion of the 259 million euro allotment to improve infrastructure in their villages. The MP had secured a January 11 appointment with EU Head of Office Alain Botherel and intended to pitch possible proposals. Hajiroussos claimed the EU official had welcomed Maronite interest.

In the south, a Mixed Bag

¶12. Ninety-eight percent of Maronites had abandoned their villages in the population exchanges that followed the 1974 conflict. Many had emigrated to Australia and the UK, but most settled in Nicosia and Limassol. Deprived of their properties and knowing only agriculture, they endured great difficulties in the early years, Hajiroussos explained. Buoying the community, however, was its appetite for education. "We are among the best educated Cypriots," the MP exclaimed, citing his community's success in law, medicine, and other professions. Maronites also made excellent small businessman. His compatriots had failed to break into

government, politics, or corporations in numbers commensurate to their population, however. Greek Cypriot clannishness deserved blame, Hajiroussos ventured, and exhortations of "Don't vote for him, he's a Maronite" were not just relics of the past. Since 1974, only two had won election to Parliament as voting members, and none had headed ministries.

¶13. Politics in the community tilted right, Hajiroussos and Markou disclosed. Maronites fervently supported former President Glafkos Clerides, for example, and his Democratic Rally (DISY) party. DISY remained the institution of choice for 60 percent of Maronites, while 30 percent supported centrist DIKO, the party of RoC President Tassos Papadopoulos. AKEL, Cyprus's communist party and the nation's largest, had won little Maronite support despite targeting the group for recruitment. Only 10 percent of the group voted AKEL, they claimed.

¶14. Maronite leaders fretted over possible assimilation into the majority Greek Cypriot group, the MP divulged. Maintaining a feeling of community, of separateness, was easy in small villages, but not so in Nicosia or Limassol. Most Maronites in the south attended Greek Cypriot schools, Hajiroussos explained, although the RoC funded a school for Catholics and paid small stipends to Maronite parents wishing to send their children to private academies. Some 80 percent of Maronites were marrying outside their community, he added. While church canons stipulated that male offspring acquired Maronite status at birth, the MP worried that future generations might lose ties to their faith and clan.

¶15. A planned shift in RoC policy might also work to assimilate the Maronites, Hajiroussos lamented. From the time of Archbishop Makarios, Cypriot laws had exempted community youth from military service. "For obvious reasons," the parliamentarian chuckled, "as it's the GREEK CYPRIOT National Guard." GCNG soldiers swore an oath to Hellenism and the Orthodox Church, something no Maronite (or Armenian or Latin, for that matter) should be asked to do.

¶16. Commenting on same-day media accounts that noted a change was imminent, in part due to difficulties enlisting sufficient numbers but also to Greek Cypriots' claims of discrimination, Hajiroussos summarized his January 10 conversation with Defense Ministry Permanent Secretary Petros Kareklas. Maronites were not averse to military service, he had told Kareklas. Further as residents of Cyprus who derived benefits from citizenship, they owed the nation plenty. But for reasons noted above, service in the National Guard was anathema to the religious group. His arguments had fallen on deaf ears with the PermSec, however. "How will our young men help fill the staffing gap?" Hajiroussos wondered, as only 30-40 reached draft age every year.

¶17. Turning to the broader Cyprus Problem, Hajiroussos and Markou fretted over growing discord between Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Maronites, they claimed, remained solidly pro-solution. "Ninety-five percent of us supported the Annan Plan," the MP asserted, regardless of the fact that much Maronite land would have fallen in the T/C federated state. Close, stable relations between the two groups benefited his community enormously, while friction did the opposite. Maronites would continue to support efforts to reunite the

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island, he concluded.

Hopes Don't Seem Great for Future

¶18. COMMENT: Superficially, the Maronite enclaved in northwest Cyprus resemble closely their Greek Cypriot counterparts in the Karpass Peninsula. Both inhabit a handful of villages smack-dab in "enemy" territory, featuring hamlets with single-digit, elderly populations. Economic

prospects for residents in each are slim, and neither ethnic community could survive without RoC transfer payments and UN largesse. In actuality, however, the Maronites' plight in the north is far graver. Demographics factor greatly: while primary and secondary schools service some 50 G/C youth in Rizokarpasso (Reftel), the school-age population in the Maronite villages is exactly zero. Politics also plays a part. While the RoC and Greek Cypriots writ large view the Karpass enclaved as the last bastion of Hellenism in the Turkish-occupied north, endeavoring to see them flourish, they pay less attention to the Maronites, whom some G/Cs consider quasi-collaborators (owing to the "freedoms" the community enjoys under T/C rule, in comparison to the enclaved Greeks). Barring a major and unforeseen liberalization in Turkish Cypriot relocation regulations -- or great leaps in geriatric care -- this minority's presence in the north seems doomed to become historical.

¶19. Via an ambitious program of church building and religious/ethnocentric education, Maronites in the government-controlled are attempting to avoid a similar fate, benefiting greatly from the protected status Cyprus's 1960 constitution awarded. We doubt, however, the community will prove able to maintain such privileges indefinitely, with demographics again to blame. At the time of independence, the three religious groups comprised 4.7 percent of the island's population, a not insignificant number. Owing to assimilation, greater fecundity of the majority G/C population, and growing immigration from Asia and eastern Europe, the picture in the government-controlled areas has changed dramatically. Even their own, optimistic demographic data, for example, show their portion has fallen to less than half the earlier figure. Throw in the north, with its 100,000-plus mainland Turkish settlers, and the Maronites represent at best one percent of the island's population. Securing continued protected status under any envisionable "United Cyprus Republic" would seem to require political influence they just don't have. END COMMENT.
SCHLICHER